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Of Once and Future Kings: Rethinking the Anglo-American Analogy in the Rising Powers Debate

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Abstract

This paper seeks to advance the so-called rising powers debate of the past fifteen years by interrogating its selective use of the past. Key to the debate are the impact of rising powers like China on the international order, and how to accommodate them. Historiography plays a crucial but unappreciated role in the debate, as scholars look to the past to make sense of the future. Especially in the United States, many compare the US now to Great Britain before 1940, the idea being that both faced the same difficulties of decline relative to rising challengers. This is the core case of power transition theory in the field of International Relations. It is also, fundamentally, weak. As I show, it relies on a 'long chronology' of British decline that the past quarter-century of historical scholarship on twentieth-century Britain has undermined. I instead propose a 'short chronology' of the transition away from Britain that emphasizes agency and contingency over structure and the *longue durée*. Bringing the work of historians to the rising powers debate thus indicates that the key factors to study are not grand systemic forces, but short-term politics and diplomacy.

Keywords

Rising powers; United States; Great Britain; declinism; history and international relations theory.

The phenomenon of rising powers has been one of the central themes in the past fifteen years of international relations, be it the actual practice or its academic study (IR). Consider the spectacular success of the concept of the 'BRICs.' Coined in 2001 by a Goldman Sachs executive, Brazil, Russia, India and China themselves adopted it as their collective self-identification after 2006. Academics arrived last to the feast, for instance founding a Cambridge-based Centre for Rising Powers in 2011 dedicated to studying the BRICs.¹ This is not to say they had been sitting still in the meantime: especially in the United States and China, the first decade of the new millennium saw the rise of a great debate on the rise of China in particular, its effect on US dominance, and whether it meant the US itself was in fact in decline.²

One of the central questions posed by the academics, the investors, and indeed the emergent powers themselves is whether newly rising great powers are a threat to world order. That is why Jim O'Neill, the banker behind BRICs, thought including them in the G7 was necessary; why Beijing insists its policy is 'peaceful rise'; and why possible US-Chinese conflict looms so large in the debate in those countries.³

It is not the first time that rising powers have caused such debate. The debate about China is in many ways the spitting image of that about Japan in the 1970s and eighties, including the worries about world order upheaval and great power conflict. And just like with Japan, scholars look to history for answers to their questions. They even prefer the same historical analogy for Washington's dilemmas today: Britain's in the first half of the twentieth century. So we find that relative to the United States, China is in the same position that Washington itself was in *vis-à-vis* Britain until 1945, and that the strategic dilemma the US faces today is very akin to the one Germany created for Britain leading up the First World War.⁴

In other words, the idea is once more that we find ourselves on the threshold of a *power transition*: the decline of a dominant state met with the rise of a challenger.⁵ Will China be a new US, Washington a new London, and the transition a peaceful succession? Or will Beijing

be a new Berlin, destabilizing world order and risking great power war? The IR theory of power transitions would certainly answer pessimistically. Power transition theorists see in these shifts moments of grave and imminent danger to international order that lead to instability or even general war. Such dislocation in turn produces a general reordering of the international system, with a new hierarchy of power and new institutions.⁶

I seek here to contribute to the rising power debate not by charting the future, but by interrogating its view of the past. I focus on the Anglo-American transition of power, if only because Germany never overtook Britain as a global power. The United States did. It is worth underlining this easily forgotten point. This is because, as I show below, the dominant view of the transition among both IR scholars and historians is profoundly *declinist*, imagining a decrepit Britain in permanent descent from the Victorian period onward. Yet as a growing revisionist literature shows, Britain remained much stronger for much longer in the twentieth century than we are used to thinking. Taking this new historiography on board profoundly changes the picture of the Anglo-American transition, with significant conclusions for the current rising powers debate.

In addition, from a theoretical point of view the Anglo-American transition is profoundly puzzling. It was accompanied by remarkable peace and continuity, not upheaval or massive conflict. Not only did the United States succeed Britain as the supreme liberal-capitalist power; it projected its power along an arc across Eurasia that had long been the “great geopolitical faultline” of British strategy too. Donald Cameron Watt called it “the replacement of Britain by the United States as the major universal power on the periphery” of Eurasia.⁷ As a result, the Anglo-American case has been crucial to theories of peaceful power transitions. Yet these theorists rely on *declinist* historiography as well, assuming the transition happened much earlier than revisionist historians would imply. As I argue in the essay’s third section, this

forces them into a ‘most-likely’ case study setup, when they could be testing their argument on a much harder case later in the century.⁸

Contemporary IR scholars and practitioners did not see a United States rising above the British Empire until the 1940s. When he coined the term ‘super-power’ in 1944, the IR theorist William T. R. Fox thought there were three, not two: the United States, the British Empire and the Soviet Union.⁹ A year earlier Harold Macmillan, then the chief civilian of the Allied Mediterranean campaign, was telling his (British) personnel that Britons were the “Greeks in this American empire,” who had to run operations “as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius.” It is probably best to see Macmillan’s quip as no more than a public schoolboys’ pep talk. His was an intriguing implication, however. The transition is commonly thought of as a long-term, structural, macroeconomic process. What the ‘Greeks’ quote implies is that how these Anglo powers navigated their transition on the short term—that is, their agency and interaction—was key instead.¹⁰

The Anglo-American transition of power is central to a great many arguments. Beyond the power transition debate, it has served Cold War historians who argue that an expansionist United States in the 1940s “march[ed] out and inherit[ed] Britain’s role.”¹¹ It is a crucial case in theories of world-economic ‘hegemony’ and the debate over whether it brings international stability.¹² The same goes for the so-called American empire debate of the past decade, where the post-1945 United States is often compared to the Victorian British Empire. The assumption underlying this comparison is not merely that the United States looks like its mid-nineteenth century predecessor, but is in fact subject to the same historical process of rise, apex, and fall. What is implicit in the Victorian comparison was stated clearly by the US IR theorist Robert Gilpin when he wrote of an interwar “interregnum” in the interwar period between British and US hegemony.¹³

All of these approaches make the crucial contribution of putting contemporary US power in its greater historical and international context. Yet in so doing they make use of a *long chronology* of the Anglo-American transition that recent historical scholarship has undermined. The next section takes a closer look at this chronology, which depicts the US's eclipse of Britain as a long-term, macro-historical process. I submit that it lends itself well to teleology. The transition's outcome—US superpower—appears inevitable in many accounts. Gilpin's 'interregnum,' derived from the language of royal succession, is exemplary of this, compressing the crucial period leading up to the transition into little more than an interlude. The Victorian comparison in the American empire debate likewise discounts the intervening interwar period, and is akin to Whig history, as I discuss below. This is not to say that taking a *longue durée* view necessarily involves a teleological claim—many macro-histories include contingency in their accounts of grand historical processes.¹⁴ However, it is to insist that the declinism of the long chronology involves Whig history, if in reverse. Though this does not make all macro-history Whiggish, it does not necessarily lead to the right questions or identify the key causes of how the US came to eclipse the British Empire.

This paper follows a very different approach. It offers a re-periodisation of the transition to arrive at a *short chronology* in which the US's eclipse of Britain was an abrupt shift, not a prolonged interregnum. Suggestively, the historian John Darwin has compared this shift to the end of the Cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, equally rapid and unexpected.¹⁵ The analysis I propose centres on precisely those factors most stressed by a contemporary like Macmillan: agency and contingency. Re-periodisation thus goes hand in hand with re-conceptualisation.

To arrive at this argument I make several moves, detailed in the second section. First and foremost, the essay connects the rising powers debate to a strong attack by historians of twentieth-century Britain on declinism. These revisionists remind us that Britain never declined

in absolute terms, and show that even in relative terms it only declined vis-à-vis a very small group of competitors. Though declinists all (briefly) acknowledge this, they go on to depict a weak and dependent Britain that, anti-declinists insist, hardly reflects historical reality. Speaking of ‘decline,’ in other words, loads the dice in favour of declinism. The right term is that Britain was *overtaken* by the United States. Consequently, the transition happened at the moment of the United States’ rise and no earlier. Anti-declinists take further issue with the state-centeredness of the decline story. It is blind to how Britain was not merely a home-grown great power but a global power, drawing on a network of ‘British connections’ including the Empire-Commonwealth, the City of London’s financial empire, and a global economic hinterland that included the United States. This revisionist argument is in fact supported by key texts within the traditional approach to the transition, as a closer look at the historiographical differences within the latter reveals.¹⁶

All of this is more than just a historians’ quibble. If the Anglo-American transition happened on the short term, was driven more by agency than structure, and came unexpectedly and contingently, then as an analogy it presents the rising powers debate with some uneasy conclusions. One is negative: as the idiosyncrasy of the last transition implies, there are no easy lessons to be drawn from history. The other is positive: it strongly suggests that the key variables are not long-term economic changes but day-to-day diplomacy and politics. A third conclusion is more theoretical. “Few IR scholars spend sufficient time asking what it is we mean when we talk about history,” George Lawson has written. This paper shows that taking periodisation, chronology and modes of historical comparison seriously can substantially advance key IR-theoretical debates.¹⁷

The Long Chronology

Fundamental to this essay is the assumption that there is no clean distinction to be made between the work of IR theorists and that of historians. Though not historians, theorists make use of particular interpretations of the past—historiographies—that substantially affect their case selection, causal arguments and thus theories. In this case, the central issue is one of *periodisation*, or what the social theorist Eviatar Zerubavel calls “punctuation of the past.”¹⁸ When did the transition happen? That question is simultaneously one about how and why it happened. Periodisation is thus an eminently theoretical pursuit. Though this makes engagement with history a potential interdisciplinary nexus, it is rarely done on neutral ground. More often than not, the encounters of non-historians with history take the form of a cattle raid, quickly in and quickly out, with little regard for the locals. Historical facts are lifted from (often secondary) sources, without due consideration for the minutiae of interpretation and historiographical debate.

This is an old historians’ complaint. What historians often forget is that through such cattle raids, certain historiographies are nevertheless imported into other fields, much like the bull the ancient Irish hero Cú Chulainn must defend in the epic, the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*. Historians and IR scholars both should acknowledge this point. It is not a call for the colonization of IR by historians. Instead it is a call for a mutually beneficial dialogue, in which historiography is taken seriously as a tool for theorizing and conceptualization, and IR (or other social-scientific) theory can prompt new historiographical questions. Interdisciplinarity, in other words, benefits more from trading rather than raiding cattle.

In the rising powers and power transition debates, competing theories rely extensively on declinist historiography, which periodises the Anglo-American case according to a long-term timescale and its associated dates and key events (the stuff of chronology). I call this the ‘long chronology.’ The long chronology places the transition in the early twentieth century.

With some simplification, there are two variations on the theme, corresponding to two different proposed moments of transition. Britain's decline and the United States' rise are dated either to around 1900, or to 1918 and the aftermath of World War I. The supposed interregnum that followed is a derivative of the last dating.

Each of these periodisations privileges a distinct causal force, each focusing primarily on British decline. The 1900 dating emphasizes long-term productive-economic processes. Distilled to its essentials, between 1890 and 1900 Britain lost the manufacturing primacy it had gained in the Industrial Revolution to the US and Germany, and so entered a long, painful twentieth-century decline. The 1918 dating foregrounds long-term financial and international political-economic changes caused by the First World War. The war destroyed the gold standard and the first globalization; Britain, the greatest benefactor and profiler of both, lost the most, and never recovered its pre-war primacy. Building on the 1918 dating, in the interregnum version Britain appears as an '*ersatz*' hegemon in the face of post-1918 shifts in the international system. The unifying theme of the long chronology's different versions is Britain's passivity in the face of *longue durée* processes. Moreover, each periodisation starts from the transition's eventual outcome—Britain's eclipse by the United States—rather than from the process leading to it.

The earliest proposed periodisation of British decline flows from "a search for [its] 'root causes'," as Keith Neilson put it.¹⁹ The fundamental argument underlying the 1900 dating is clear and macroeconomic. In the two decades surrounding the *fin de siècle*, the long-time nineteenth-century primacy Britain had enjoyed in gross national product came to an end, as the country's economy was surpassed in productivity by first the United States and then Germany. It never recovered its productive primacy, and so, goes the claim, started the long slide from its onetime Victorian height to the much humbler status of just another middling power later in the twentieth century. This manufactures-based argument is often linked to the

view that Britain missed the boat, as it were, of the Second Industrial Revolution, coming to lag behind its German and US rivals technologically.²⁰ Thus one can find proponents interpreting British colonial expansion as the reactive and defensive policy of a declining power, rather than a dominant one; its settling of outstanding differences with the United States in the Western Hemisphere as appeasement, not rapprochement; and its joining the anti-German Entente as retrenchment instead of forward policy.²¹ To cite two evocative headings, around 1900 the British Empire became a “weary titan” whose fate was to await the “coming of a bipolar world.”²² The latter showcases how far the *longue durée* can stretch. It directly links the loss of Britain’s productive primacy around 1900 to the rise of the protagonists of the Cold War half a century later. In other words, it reduces the first half of the twentieth century to a coda of structural economic changes that occurred at the century’s outset.

The First World War periodisation of British decline is based on a less straightforward and parsimonious argument. Rather than compare the national economic bases of great powers, the second variation on the long chronology looks at changes in the international political economy. The watershed events of this story are the abandonment of the gold standard and the emergence of the so-called ‘warfare state’ over the course of the Great War. As the first total war, it forced those fighting it to mobilize all their assets—not just military, but also organizational, financial, monetary and industrial.²³ Warfare states were set up to do this, putting the final nail in the coffin of the nineteenth-century night watchman’s state. They promptly ‘monetarized’ the economy, in Joseph Schumpeter’s phrase, seizing control of the money supply which had previously been determined by the strictures of the gold standard. Controlled from the City of London, the gold standard had given Britain what Marxian international political economists term hegemony over the world economy.²⁴

Yet by the time Britain emerged victorious from the war, it had been reduced to a net debtor nation. Most of its foreign debt was held by New York banks, marking the emergence

of that city as a major international financial centre for the first time. The United States became a net creditor for the first time as well. Without its financial primacy or gold standard, Britain could no longer act as the guarantor of the world economy. It had lost its hegemony. The United States meanwhile was poised to seize that position. That it took twenty years to do so does not fundamentally affect the argument that the end of the pre-war globalized economy, with its free trade and stable gold standard, signalled the end of British hegemony.²⁵ Like the 1900 version, the 1918 dating privileges grand processes, though in this case the rise of the warfare state, the end of the gold standard regime, and the City's loss of financial primacy. The United States' rise to hegemony is then ultimately a response to the instability of a world dislocated by these vacuums. More extreme versions of this argument in fact claim Britain's replacement by the United States was the natural outcome of global capitalism reaching a new equilibrium out of a period of self-produced chaos.²⁶

A variation of the same dating is the interregnum story. Proceeding from the second periodisation, proponents confront the fact that the United States did not fill its shoes until the 1940s by arguing that the function of hegemon fell back to Britain almost by default. Because the United States failed in its moment of international leadership under Woodrow Wilson and refused to join the League of Nations, Britain remained as a sort of *ersatz* hegemon. Because of this less than optimal outcome, later on "the British couldn't and the United States wouldn't" save the interwar international (economic) order from the Great Depression, as Charles Kindleberger pithily concluded.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, the interregnum story finds much purchase among US diplomatic historians. Nonetheless influential treatments of British international history during the Interbellum also accept it, with Britain appearing as an overextended great power forced into retrenchment.²⁸ The interregnum story treats the Interbellum as a single homogenous period, beginning and ending with a world war. It is these wars, products of an international system unbalanced by the lack of a real centre, that drive London's eventual

eclipse by Washington. The transition's outcome looms large. The ups and downs of British-US relations and fortunes during this period seem less significant by contrast.²⁹

A final and more recent variation on the long chronology is the American empire debate. Treating the United States as an empire, once limited to Europeans and Marxists, has in the past decade become prominent in the United States itself. The influential US IR theorist Joseph Nye called it "the dominant narrative of the twenty-first century."³⁰ One of the great attractions of this move is that it puts the United States' international dominance of the past seventy-odd years into its greater historical context. By emphasizing historical comparison with older empires, it allows scholars to view US primacy through a wider-angle lens than older prisms, like American exceptionalism or the Cold war era.³¹ This advantage notwithstanding, the empire debate has been persistently dogged by doubts about the value added of using the concept of empire to understand the United States' role in world politics. Much of the criticism, from within IR, history and beyond, has focused on the concept's fuzziness and degree of applicability to US foreign policy.³²

Comparisons and analogies between the modern US and historical empires, chiefly Rome and Victorian Britain, drive the empire debate.³³ Yet although the United States gained its independence from the British Empire, and the two remained historical contemporaries, indeed rivals for much of their existence, this hardly features in the literature. Little to no work explores what role, if any, the Anglo-American transition played in their imperial similarity. One certainly finds many suggestive parallels and evocative metaphors between Washington's behaviour and that of London: one author asks whether the United States has picked up "the torch that the British dropped a half century back," while another posits that British imperialism was a "*dry run* for the modern American variety." The underlying question here is, as the historian Bernard Porter asks, "if two historical phenomena, *however far apart*, appear so similar, might there not be some common factors behind them both?"³⁴

Porter's question is classically historical. Yet rather than taking the seemingly obvious next step, and looking at the period in which the US actually overtook the British Empire, many of the answers put forth involve static comparisons between the assumed heydays of British and US imperialism in the Victorian and (post-)Cold War eras, respectively. They thus forego what would appear to be the crucial case: the direct intersection, in time and space, of British imperialism and global US expansionism in the First and particularly Second World Wars. A recent and systematic treatment of the parallels drawn by the empire debate serves to underline this point.³⁵

Seeking to show how the United States carries on Britain's imperial legacy even in a very different world, Julian Go compares the two Anglo nations' respective phases of expansion, apogee and diminishment, concluding they both showcased the same "patterns of empire." His is a long chronology, putting Victorian Britain side by side with the Cold War United States, like the old economist's rule of thumb comparing peak to peak and trough to trough. This limits him, however, to indicating how the United States' imperial experience in the Philippines and Guam was analogous to Britain's in India and Fiji, or how Britain's relatively small empire before 1815 was like in size to the United States' around 1900. To Go, Britain and the United States underwent the same historical cycles of rise, apex, and fall, making the parallels between one and the other the products of these grand historical arcs. He derives this concept from Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach of the 1970s and eighties, specifically Wallerstein's idea that states rise to and fall from hegemony over the world-system's centre.³⁶ Go does not, however, incorporate criticism then levelled at Wallerstein that he employed teleology and had written a Whig history in which all things tended to his conclusion—"history as scripture" where human action does not matter very much.³⁷

This tendency to flatten out agency and contingency defines the long chronology. Fundamentally, whether the transition is explained according to national wealth, function in the

world economy, the international system, or patterns of empire, and whether it is periodised according to early, middle, or late dates, the unifying theme is how little Britain could do about the US's eventual ascendance.

A more apt characterization would be that the two countries navigated the power shift between them so successfully that its outcome appeared inevitable only in retrospect. Power transition theory, with its focus on the dangers inherent to such transitions, gives an idea of what an achievement this actually was. Historians of Anglo-American relations have long underscored this impression in their accounts of the variable, often unfriendly and sometimes downright hostile relations between the two countries in the first half of the twentieth century. The late 1920s indeed saw a naval arms race and a war scare, while throughout the 1930s relations were cold rather than cordial.³⁸

Furthermore, the long chronology relies on a very particular understanding of British decline, as regular, linear, and long-term. A quarter-century of revisionist work on the twentieth-century history of the British state, industry, technology and Empire has exploded this neat account. It is no longer possible to confidently argue that the British Empire from circa 1890 was weak, its technology inferior, its industry uncompetitive, or its state backward. In fact the Britain that emerges from these new histories is the world's only global power, technologically advanced, well-organized and militarily prepared. Declinism appears as an ideology of the post-war era, and abandoning it implies that Britain was surpassed, suddenly and without warning. As Fox's original definition of superpower indicated, "until the middle of the Second World War, it was not entirely clear to many contemporaries that Britain was a terminally declining [power]."³⁹

It is necessary to "redefine the problem," David Edgerton wrote in 1997, "of 'decline.' For the British relative decline has been from a position of extraordinary relative strength (...). The key to understanding it is explaining success and not failure, and in explaining decreasing

relative success, rather than increasing relative failure.” What is therefore needed is not an approach that starts from the transition’s eventual outcome and searches for its roots far back in time, as declinists do. The new historiography of twentieth-century Britain indicates that instead, the Anglo-American transition was propelled by contingent events, driven by international interaction (and so by agency) on the short term. Such a process is best understood through a short chronology.⁴⁰

The Short Chronology

The revisionists of Britain’s decline do not directly address the issue of the Anglo-American transition, or the rising powers debate. Their primary concern is with the historiography of modern Britain, rather than that of Anglo-American relations, let alone US historiography. Their challenge to the declinist historiography of Britain nonetheless implies that Washington eclipsed London over a far shorter period than we are used to thinking of—a few years rather than many decades. This is what I term the ‘short chronology,’ which I detail further in this section. I also critically re-examine a key text in the long chronology tradition, aiming to show how in actuality crucial arguments underpinning it support a short chronology.

The main thrust of the British revisionist attack is aimed at what they have termed ‘declinism.’ To paraphrase Edgerton, declinism is a sort of reverse Whig history, which instead of painting a picture of inevitable progress paints one of inescapable decline: “practically everything that ever happened in England was the seed [of its diminishment].” These authors hold that this image is highly simplistic and is made to justify the present rather than explain the past, as Herbert Butterfield argued in his seminal attack on Whig history. In two different strains of argument, a moderate and a radical reinterpretation of twentieth-century British history, the revisionists have sought to overturn the declinist consensus.⁴¹

Moderate revisionists take issue primarily with the declinist periodisation of British decline. Their central argument is that declinists, like Paul Kennedy or Correlli Barnett, get the fall's timing wrong. Thus while they dispute the interpretation of the sources, or declinist causal accounts, moderates do not challenge the idea that Britain declined itself. Instead, their debate with declinists revolves around power and its exercise in international politics, a classic theme in both diplomatic history and IR. One of the key moderate revisionist arguments is that declinists overestimate British power during its supposed height under Victoria, and underestimate it during the country's allegedly terminal descent afterward. Fundamentally, they argue that it is impossible to directly derive a country's international stature from its manufacturing base or technological advances. As the Canadian historian Gordon Martel puts it, "counting [Britain's] coal mines and enumerating her rolling stock is a meaningless exercise: it [is] extremely difficult to translate units of wealth into instruments of power."⁴²

Because they reject the long-term, structural view of the long chronology, moderate revisionists reinterpret Britain's fortunes in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Contrary to characterizing the First World War as a Pyrrhic victory, the moderates bring Britain's status as one of that war's main victors back to the forefront. They point out that after 1918 Germany and Russia, its main imperial rivals, lay prostrate; its empire had expanded; and that Britain, not the US, was (together with France) the guarantor of the post-war status quo through the League of Nations. Essentially, this means seeing Britain's fortunes on their own terms, not in light of the eventual end of its time at the summit of global power. Corollary to this argument is an emphasis on agency: whether that of Britain or its allies and contenders internationally, the moderates "find the main dynamic variable in diplomacy," in John Ferris's words.⁴³

The radical revisionist argument goes further because it seeks to overturn not merely the periodisation of British decline, but the terms of the debate itself. The moderates do not question the basic narrative of decline and fall, nor the choice of the nation-state as the frame for that

narrative.⁴⁴ Radical revisionists do. Edgerton for instance challenges the utility of the concept of British decline as a prism on twentieth-century British history, on the grounds that it completely obscures the British state's technological and military achievements. He goes so far as to argue that what one is dealing with here is not history but "*anti-histories*" of the British state—the uncritical adoption by historians of pundits' accounts of the state of England from the 1960s.⁴⁵ These have fused with the declinists' desire to explain Britain's eclipse as a global power to obscure how until at least the 1950s Britain was in fact an extraordinarily technologically advanced, militarily prepared, and particularly *modern* state that could easily stand the comparison with rivals like Germany, Japan, or the United States.

Radical revisionists go much further than the moderates in challenging the declinist account of Britain's material power. They take great issue with the image of British military weakness traditionally associated with the 1930s. For example, radicals argue that the Royal Navy remained second to none until well into the Second World War. In like manner they have challenged the traditionally dim view of British air power, arguing the Royal Air Force technologically led the world and was outbuilding all other powers by 1939. They even challenge the entrenched consensus on Britain's weakness on land, showing that despite its small size the British Army was the world's most mechanized, quite to the contrary of the received opinion that this was the German *Wehrmacht*. Behind these reinterpretations lies a new account of British wealth and technological achievement, which radical revisionists argue were much greater in the first half of the twentieth century than declinists have assumed.⁴⁶

Another strain of radical revisionism attacks the implicit nationalism in many declinist accounts. A central assumption behind declinism is that international power is home-grown; hence, the national unit of the United Kingdom is compared to the much larger US, Soviet Union and so on. However, as Edgerton argues, Britain's power and advances on the world stage derived to a great degree from its ability to draw on its empire and the world economic

web, at the centre of which it sat.⁴⁷ The fact that British international power during this period should not be seen as a monolithic thing that was ‘made in Britain’ is further underlined by the imperial historian John Darwin. Quite to the contrary of equating Britain with the UK in the first half of the twentieth century, as most of the IR and historical literature does, Darwin foregrounds what he calls the “British world-system.” This was a sort of subsystem of the international comprising Britain, its Dominions and subject colonies, British India, and the City of London’s global “commercial empire.” The component parts of this system interacted with and reinforced each other to constitute a British superpower *avant la lettre*. It was only when this world-system was fatally undermined during the Second World War that Britain’s days at the pinnacle of international relations were numbered.⁴⁸

Darwin’s contention finds support in one of the key texts cited by proponents of the long chronology of the Anglo-American transition, Charles Kindleberger’s seminal study of *The World in Depression* (1973). As briefly noted above, Kindleberger’s main conclusion was that the Great Depression was so severe and prolonged because there was no single dominant financial centre and currency that, backed by a strong state’s monetary policy, could stabilise the world economy by preventing tit-for-tat protectionism and autarky drives. Britain and the pound sterling had been able to do this in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, but were unable to in the 1930s.⁴⁹ An economic historian, Kindleberger chose his period (1929-1939) deliberately and carefully limited his financial and monetary argument to questions of economic history. His book, published during a later twentieth-century economic crisis, was highly influential. Within IR, Robert Gilpin and others extrapolated from Kindleberger’s argument to posit that a world without a single politically and economically dominant state is more prone to instability and war, an argument known as hegemonic stability theory.⁵⁰ However, they did not take into account Kindleberger’s periodisation. Gilpin in fact treated the whole Interbellum as a single period, in keeping with the interregnum chronology. But the entire premise of Kindleberger’s

book is to divide the Interbellum in two, the break coming in 1929-31. Moreover, in the IR literature derived from Kindleberger's work, political-economic dominance is cast in productive terms, much like in the work of historians of British decline like Kennedy. This contrasts with Kindleberger's own financial and monetary focus.⁵¹

When related to the radical British revisionists' reframing of Britain as the heart of a world-system and economic web, the problem with the IR literature's extrapolation from Kindleberger becomes apparent. In *The World in Depression*, the turning point is the 1931 financial crisis which began with a bank failure in Austria. When it mutated into the Depression, it frayed the web on which British power rested. Kindleberger, in other words, suggested that if there was a 'root cause' behind the transition away from Britain, it was the Depression, as it disturbed the equilibrium essential to British power. He thus stands much closer to the radical revisionists than he does to proponents of the earliest long chronology like Kennedy. To derive from his tightly spun financial and monetary argument a much larger theory about *general* international stability is furthermore a large leap to make. It is largely predicated on treating the interwar period as one whole – precisely what Kindleberger does not do.

Taken together, what emerges from all of these accounts is the need to periodise the Anglo-American transition of power according to a *short chronology*. Both the revisionist argument that Britain remained a world-leading power in the 1930s, and Kindleberger's that the crisis of that decade was the cause of London's eclipse, point to the late 1930s and 1940s as the key period. The key events were the Depression and the Second World War, which appear as abrupt shocks to Britain and the US's positions, rather than codas of a longer process of decline. The short chronology stands the standard account on its head: Britain entered this short period as a remarkably strong power, yet by its end had been decisively overtaken by a US that had been comparatively weak. These rapid changes occurred not exogenously, like the macroeconomic shifts of the long chronology, but flowed from conscious political action, like

the choice and ability to rearm.⁵² This enables one to recover a sense of the options open and choices made by the people actually involved, and makes it difficult to take the transition's outcome for granted. Where the long chronology paints an image of the Anglo-American transition as a Cartesian x-graph, with a declining curve intersecting a rising one, the short chronology is best likened to the volatile ups and downs of a seismograph.

This presents a host of new questions. The first is implied by how differently the revisionists and Kindleberger appraise British power: if Britain was in fact strong during the interwar period, or even the only global power, then how was it so rapidly eclipsed? Any answer to this central question must also confront the radical revisionists' insistence that British power cannot be understood in national terms during this period, and that one must take the Empire-Commonwealth into account. Indeed the radicals' emphasis on London's ability to mobilize the world economy against its enemies through its control of the world seas implies that British power was in a sense transnational. This raises difficult questions about international power, war, and interdependence, which should interest any IR scholar and are highly relevant to the current rising powers debate.⁵³

A final, crucial, yet curiously understated issue raised by the short chronology is the trajectory of US power. When exactly the US rose to global dominance is a cardinal issue in any treatment of the Anglo-American transition, yet it is rarely if ever explicitly stated. The classic story is that the country rose to superpower through victory in the Second World War, but (as this essay has made abundantly clear) a large and influential section of academic opinion dates it to the First World War or even earlier. Few distinguish between either dating. Adam Tooze's very well-received *The Deluge* (2014) is representative of this tendency. Tooze makes a strong case for the First World War periodisation discussed above, arguing the war marked the first time that the US began to dominate world politics, owing especially to the immense financial clout it amassed. Washington used this, according to Tooze, to force decisions in the

painful post-war transition to peace, for instance strong-arming France with the Dawes Plan following the French occupation of the Ruhr. However, because he ends his narrative in 1931, Tooze largely avoids the issue of the Depression, which affected the US more deeply and for longer than any other great power. Moreover, he assigns more guilt to the British Empire than to the US for worsening the crisis by embracing protectionism, implying Washington did not necessarily carry the most weight in the world economy. Indeed, he writes Britain was “the only truly global power” throughout the 1930s. Likewise, he ignores the US’s military weakness in the 1930s: the country was a minor power on land and in the air, while at sea its navy was outclassed by both Britain’s and Japan’s.⁵⁴

The implication is that, in the 1930s, US power suffered a critical setback it would not overcome until the early 1940s. The British Empire, much more deeply embedded in the world order and economy, was less affected. Rather than going against the short chronology Tooze therefore actually supports it. He is not far at all from Kindleberger in seeing in 1931 a clear break in the Interbellum. However, like Kindleberger, he leaves open “the question, which ‘declinology’ never adequately tackled, of how the United States succeeded to so many of Britain’s global claims and prerogatives.”⁵⁵ This is also the question of how a comparatively weak United States could possibly have overtaken a strong Britain so rapidly. This, I contend, is best addressed through a short chronology. Not only does this stand the traditional image of the Anglo-American transition on its head; it implies the need for a change of focus in the current rising powers debate as well.

Conclusion: The Historiography of the Anti-Historiographers

There is much to gain from the dialogue between historical and theoretical approaches pursued in this essay. This is not a new argument. Recent years have seen a historical turn in IR, which insists that “history and social science are co-implicated” as scholarly endeavours. In that

tradition, this essay pushes back against the idea that periodisation, and historiography in general, is something only “historians do or are supposed to be doing,” to use the words of Anders Stephanson (a historian). Much work in the historical turn so far has been meta-theoretical, aiming to break down the “eternal divide” between history and IR in the abstract. It has marketed the analytical and theoretical tools scholars can gain by marrying historical and social-scientific epistemologies, ontologies, and modes of analysis. This paper has taken a more concrete tack, showing how a quintessentially historical concern like periodisation is implicated in the explanations and theories even of non-historians.⁵⁶

My point has not been to lambast the debate’s consensus view as ahistorical and thus wrong-headed. On the contrary, I have attempted to show that even those who view historiography as the arcane business of historians nevertheless engage in it. I call this the ‘historiography of the anti-historiographers.’ It may not satisfy the historian, but outside her parish it can easily go unchallenged, all the while affecting the way subjects are approached, categorized, and explained far beyond the historical vicarage, and indeed academia as a whole. It should therefore be taken seriously, and engaged with as if it was as openly and clearly stated as social science theory. This can reinvigorate old debates and address new conundrums in international history that may yield important new insights.

Taking the historiography of the anti-historiographers seriously is not a call to colonization by historians of IR or other social sciences. The aim should instead be a mutually enriching dialogue between the two fields. That dialogue can take the form of criticism and controversy, as this paper has done from a mainly historical point of view. Nonetheless, it should not be lopsided. IR theory can reinvigorate and recast historical debates, as well. This essay, for instance, represents such an effort in transatlantic and diplomatic history, which David Reynolds claims “has played itself out as a dynamic historiographical force.” In a time of world and global history, imperial history, and ‘big’ history, a field concerning itself mainly

with the relations between just two Anglophone countries may indeed appear parochial. Yet Reynolds's opinion is premature. By making historiography speak to social-scientific theory, transatlantic history can recover its dynamism. As the anti-declinists have shown, there is much we do not know about the Anglo-American transition.⁵⁷

The same holds true for the rising powers and the future of world order today. Reacting to the concern generated by the rise of China especially, one side of the rising powers debate insists that power shifts do not necessarily lead to conflict, let alone a crisis in world order. Some even reject power transition theory wholesale. As alluded to above, others have pursued a small but fruitful avenue of research into the phenomenon of peaceful power transitions.⁵⁸

Stephen Rock and Charles Kupchan were among the first to emphasize the peace of the Anglo-American transition, and how this puzzled classical power transition theory. In accounting for how peace not war "broke out" between Britain and the United States, Kupchan identifies progressive rapprochement as the central causal mechanism, driven by diplomatic agency as the major explanatory factor. His argument is thus conceptually very similar to the one made here. Nonetheless he follows a standard periodisation, dating the transition to 1900, around the time US GNP became the world's largest. The result is that he chooses a most-likely case. Tying anti-declinst historiography to his framework would yield a significant theoretical gain. First of all, one would expect the 'breaking out' of peace in the chaotic 1940s to be much more puzzling than in the comparatively peaceful *fin de siècle*. Secondly, if what is at stake in this case is not the decline of one power intersecting with the rise of another, but one's ascent outpacing another's, then power transition theory requires rethinking. Finally, tying the re-periodisation offered here to Kupchan's argument further implies that the key issues at stake in the rise of new powers are diplomacy and politics.⁵⁹

The consequences for global stability of the potential waning of US hegemony has been a major strain in the work of another US IR scholar, John Ikenberry. His main argument is that

US hegemony has been exceptionally liberal in character, a feature he thinks it shares with its Victorian British predecessor. Both were in succession “liberal hegemons.” By thus characterising Washington as London’s heir, Ikenberry tacks close to the American empire debate and the long chronology. On the issue of the current rising powers, Ikenberry is adamant that the international institutions built under the aegis of US hegemony, thanks to that country’s liberalism, take the interests of the rest of the globe sufficiently into account to survive the end of US dominance. This he contrasts to the period preceding the United States’ rise, which he (following Gilpin in particular) sees as an interregnum. A fresh historiographical perspective on Ikenberry’s historical comparisons opens up new and intriguing issues. If the United States rapidly and unexpectedly succeeded to Britain’s position, it becomes all the more of an achievement that the two countries overcame their markedly distant relations in the Interbellum to preserve liberal hegemony at its greatest moment of crisis in the 1940s. This has important consequences for Ikenberry’s argument. If the world order was not US-built but international at root, and built at a moment of high wartime crisis, then Ikenberry’s argument that we need not worry about US decline today is strengthened.⁶⁰

A short-chronological approach to the empire debate may also lead to advances. For instance, in earlier work Go has argued that the manner of the United States’ rise was conditioned by the shape of the contemporaneous “global field.” The United States could rely on “European imperial networks rather than constructing a formal empire of its own,” working through rather than against them to secure its interests. Go’s global field theory seems especially applicable to Darwin’s idea of the British world-system. It is clear that British power flowed from this system, yet from Cold War alliances like the Australia-New Zealand-US (ANZUS) Treaty we know parts of it reoriented themselves toward the US. One is tempted to draw the analogy with current times. To what extent does US power rely on a ‘world-system’ of its own? How do rising powers relate to it? And is it possible, even necessary, for a would-be challenger

to co-opt such a system? Theory and historiography can go hand in hand to achieve analytical grip on such empirical questions.⁶¹

The historical perspective taken here can significantly contribute to the debate on today's rising powers. There is, of course, the old historians' caveat that there are no straightforward lessons to be drawn from history. Yet even with that in mind, the Anglo-American example has some important implications for the way we talk about any mooted shift today. Much of the debate is pitched in grand-historical terms, as the epochal end of an era, whether something as short as the American half-century or as huge as the past two centuries of Western dominance. Yet it is clear from the above that the major transition of the past century was a short-term affair that took place over a few short years in the 1940s. None foresaw that moment or the manner in which the United States overtook Britain. The way events played out was not driven by structure or great historical forces but by the contingent choices of politicians and bureaucrats, diplomats and generals, and – not to forget – anti-colonial nationalists.

Diplomacy and politics, whether public or bureaucratic, determined the course of the transition. Consequently these should be the foci of the current rising powers debate, not systems or structures. We should keep firmly in mind that the situation can change radically and unpredictably in a brief timespan. None in the rising powers debate of the 1980s could foresee the end of the Cold War, the stagnation of Japan, or the US leap into unipolarity. David Armitage and Jo Guldi have recently claimed that history can only achieve relevance in the public sphere by orienting itself on the *longue durée*. Yet as this essay has shown, the opposite is true here. It is the short term that should occupy our minds if we want to understand the rise of the new powers.⁶²

¹ Jim O'Neill, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs," *Goldman Sachs*, November 2001, <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/building-better.html>; "About — Centre for Rising Powers," Page, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://www.crp.polis.cam.ac.uk/about>. The CRP apparently does not follow the inclusion of South Africa into the club by the BRICs (now BRICS) themselves, nor does it seem to focus on Russia anymore.

² For a very limited sample of this debate see e.g. Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (December 28, 2011): 41–78, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00066; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Michael Beckley, "Debating China's Rise and U.S. Decline," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (December 13, 2012): 172–81, doi:10.1162/ISEC_c_00111; "Special Issue: Chinese Foreign Policy: The Quest for Power, Security, and Status," *Pacific Focus* 28, no. 2 (August 2013).

³ Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 1 (March 20, 2010): 5–36, doi:10.1093/cjip/pop014; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?," *International Security* 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2005): 7–45, doi:10.1162/016228805775124589; David A. Lake, "American Hegemony and the Future of East–West Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 23–30, doi:10.1111/j.1528-3577.2006.00226.x; Amitav Acharya, "Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 158–73, doi:10.1111/isqu.12084.

⁴ Barry Buzan and Michael Cox, "China and the US: Comparable Cases of 'Peaceful Rise'?", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 2 (January 6, 2013): 109–32, doi:10.1093/cjip/pot003; Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (February 2013): 116–28; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (February 2013): 130–42.

⁵ As in the eighties: A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, New ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New ed. (London: Fontana Press, 1989).

⁶ Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War," *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (2014): 1, doi:10.1017/S0020818313000192.

⁷ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135; D. Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain's Place, 1900-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

⁸ E.g. Stephen R. Rock, *Why Peace Breaks out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Charles Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁹ William T. R. Fox, *The Super-Powers: The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—Their Responsibility for Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944).

¹⁰ Richard Crossman, "The Making of Macmillan," *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 9, 1964. Recorded in subtly different form in the Diary of Hugh Dalton, January 1 & 2, 1944. Dalton Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, UK. Macmillan was alluding to Horace, *Epistulae* 2.1.156, "*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit ...*" Crossman glossed the quip in positive terms, as a virtuous British-US division of labor.

¹¹ E.g. Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: Allied Diplomacy and the World Crisis of 1943-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Bruce Cumings, "'Revising Postrevisionism,' Or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 4 (October 1, 1993): 549, doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.1993.tb00599.x.

¹² Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939* (London: Allen Lane, 1973); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements and the Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987); Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time*, New ed. (London: Verso Books, 2009); Beverly J. Silver and Giovanni Arrighi, "Polanyi's 'double Movement': The Belle Époques of British and US Hegemony Compared," *Politics & Society* 31, no. 2 (2003): 325–355.

¹³ Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, 127–31. See further Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, New edition (New York: Penguin, 2009); Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 1.; or the April 2011 special issue of the *Journal of International Relations & Development*.

¹⁴ E.g. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949); James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 476–82.

¹⁶ Britain could also draw on the US market, in fact. David Edgerton, “Liberal Militarism and the British State,” *New Left Review*, I, no. 185 (February 1991): 138–69; *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Darwin, *The Empire Project*.

¹⁷ George Lawson, “The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 205, doi:10.1177/1354066110373561.

¹⁸ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 83.

¹⁹ Keith Neilson, “‘Greatly Exaggerated’: The Myth of the Decline of Great Britain before 1914,” *The International History Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 695, doi:10.1080/07075332.1991.9640599.

²⁰ Famous versions of this story are Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972); *The Audit of War: The Illusion & Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1986); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976); *The Great Powers*. Cf. David Edgerton, “The Prophet Militant and Industrial: The Peculiarities of Correlli Barnett,” *Twentieth Century British History* 2, no. 3 (1991): 360–79, doi:10.1093/tcbh/2.3.360.

²¹ For colonial expansion read as a sign of weakness, see Porter, *Empire and Superempire*; Herfried Münkler, *Empires: The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 18–46; Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 171–74. For claims of appeasement and retrenchment, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988), chaps. 4–7; Kennedy, *The Great Powers*, 202–55.

²² Respectively, Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*; Kennedy, *The Great Powers*, chaps. 5 & 6.

²³ Hein A. M. Klemann, “Totale Oorlog En Het Thuisfront. Een Inleiding,” in *Thuisfront. Oorlog En Economie in de Twintigste Eeuw*, ed. Madelon de Keizer and Ralf Futselaar, Niod-Jaarboek 14 (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003), 1–14.

²⁴ E.g. Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy*; Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*.

²⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd Beacon Paperback ed (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001); John Gerard Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions,

and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36, no. 2

(1982): 388–92; Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, 123–31.

²⁶ E.g. Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly J. Silver, eds., *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Silver and Arrighi, “Polanyi’s ‘double Movement.’”

²⁷ Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, 294.

²⁸ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). is representative of US historiography; Paul M. Kennedy, “The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy 1865–1939,” *Review of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (1976): 195–215, doi:10.1017/S0260210500116699; Barnett, *The Audit of War of the British*.

²⁹ In addition to Kennedy and Barnett, see e.g. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³⁰ Michael Cox, “The Empire’s Back in Town: Or America’s Imperial Temptation — Again,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 32, no. 1 (February 1, 2003): 1–27, doi:10.1177/03058298030320010101; Ferguson, *Colossus*; Maier, *Among Empires*; Porter, *Empire and Superempire*; Münkler, *Empires*; Go, *Patterns of Empire*; Paul A. Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (December 1, 2011): 1348–91, doi:10.1086/ahr.116.5.1348; Joseph S. Nye Jr., “U.S. Power and Strategy After Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (2003): 60.

³¹ Go, *Patterns of Empire*, 1–2.

³² G. John Ikenberry, “Liberalism and Empire: Logics of Order in the American Unipolar Age,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 4 (2004): 610–12, doi:10.1017/S0260210504006254; Alexander J. Motyl, “Is Everything Empire? Is Empire Everything?,” *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 234–36, doi:10.2307/20433991; Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 253–55, doi:10.1017/S0003055407070220; Miriam Prys and Stefan Robel, “Hegemony, Not Empire,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14, no. 2 (2011): 249–54, doi:10.1057/jird.2010.2.

³³ Mainly because these are culturally the most familiar, one suspects—much as they were in Britain’s imperial past. See Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2009); Krishan Kumar, “Greece and Rome in the British Empire: Contrasting Role Models,” *The Journal of British Studies* 51,

no. 1 (January 2012): 76–101, doi:10.1086/662545; Jeanne Morefield, *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁴ Maier, *Among Empires*, 3; Porter, *Empire and Superempire*, 8 & 10. Emphasis added.

³⁵ Such a case does not lend itself easily to the traditional comparative method, because it does not involve the sort of static, discrete units of analysis required. On this see Justin Rosenberg, “Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 307–40, doi:10.1177/1354066106067345. I thank my anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

³⁶ Go, *Patterns of Empire*, chap. 1 & 2, pp. 19–24, following Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy* & Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*. In fairness to Go, his main aim is to problematize American exceptionalism, not to explain the US’s similarity to Britain.

³⁷ Theda Skocpol, “Wallerstein’s World Capitalist System: A Theoretical and Historical Critique,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 5 (March 1, 1977): 1075–90. “History as scripture” from John M. Hobson, George Lawson, and Justin Rosenberg, “Historical Sociology,” ed. Robert A. Denemark, *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3360.

³⁸ Watt, *Succeeding John Bull*; B. J. C. McKercher, ed., *Anglo-American Relations in the 1920’s: The Struggle for Supremacy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1991); Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World: Great Britain and America from the Beginning*, 1st American ed (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008), chap. 6; Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, chap. 11; John Darwin, “The Fall of the Empire State,” *Diplomatic History* 25, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 501–5, doi:10.1111/0145-2096.00281; *The Empire Project*, 325–26, 362–67.

³⁹ Burk, *Old World, New World*, 383.

⁴⁰ David Edgerton, “The Decline of Declinism,” *Business History Review* 71, no. 2 (June 1997): 201–6, doi:10.2307/3116157.

⁴¹ Edgerton, “The Prophet Militant and Industrial,” 366; Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1965). See further Deirdre N. McCloskey, “The Politics of Stories in Historical Economics,” in *If You’re So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Barry Supple, “Fear of Failing: Economic History and the Decline of Britain,” *The Economic History Review* 47, no. 3 (August 1, 1994): 441–58, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0289.1994.tb01385.x; Richard English and Michael Kenny, “British Decline or the Politics of Declinism?,” *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 1, no. 2 (June 1, 1999): 252–66, doi:10.1111/1467-856X.00014; Jim

Tomlinson, "Inventing 'decline': The Falling behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years," *The Economic History Review* 49, no. 4 (1996): 731–57; *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Postwar Britain*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014); "Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century," *Twentieth Century British History* 20, no. 2 (2009): 227–51.

⁴² Gordon Martel, "The Meaning of Power: Rethinking the Decline and Fall of Great Britain," *The International History Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 667 & 682, doi:10.1080/07075332.1991.9640598.

⁴³ John R. Ferris, "'The Greatest Power on Earth': Great Britain in the 1920s," *The International History Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 729, doi:10.1080/07075332.1991.9640600.

⁴⁴ And so declinists and their moderate revisionist opponents both work within the classical tradition of diplomatic history. See David Reynolds, "From the Transatlantic to the Transnational: Reflections on the Changing Shape of International History," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 24, no. 1 (2013): 135–38.

⁴⁵ Edgerton, "The Prophet Militant and Industrial"; idem, "Science and the Nation: Towards New Histories of Twentieth-Century Britain," *Historical Research* 78, no. 199 (February 1, 2005): 98–106, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2281.2005.00225.x; and idem, *Warfare State*, chaps. 4 & 5; Matthew Grant, "Historians, the Penguin Specials and the 'State-of-the-Nation' Literature, 1958–64," *Contemporary British History* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 29–54, doi:10.1080/13619460308565450. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Joseph A. Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933–39: A Study in Appeasement and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); "Did the Royal Navy Decline between the Two World Wars?," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 4 (July 4, 2014): 18–24, doi:10.1080/03071847.2014.946689; Cry *Havoc: How the Arms Race Drove the World to War, 1931–1941* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), chaps. 15–16; Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 26–41; *England and the Aeroplane: Militarism, Modernity and Machines* (London: Penguin, 2013); John R. Ferris, "Review Article: The Air Force Brats' View of History: Recent Writing and the Royal Air Force, 1918–1960," *The International History Review* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1998): 118–43, doi:10.1080/07075332.1998.9640817; Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). On pre-war Germany's comparative technological backwardness and poverty, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

⁴⁷ Edgerton, "Liberal Militarism and the British State"; Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 48–57. He has also made this point regarding science and technology: Edgerton, "Science and the Nation," 108–9; "The Contradictions of Techno-Nationalism and Techno-Globalism: A Historical Perspective," *New Global Studies* 1, no. 1 (2007).

⁴⁸ John Darwin, "Britain's Empires," in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–20; Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 1–22. See also Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006).

⁴⁹ Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*.

⁵⁰ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, chaps. 1 & 2. See also Robert O. Keohane, "The Theory of Hegemonic Stability and Changes in International Economic Regimes, 1967-1977," in *Change in the International System*, ed. Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), 131–62; *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), chap. 3; Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change"; Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization* 39, no. 4 (1985): 579–614; G. John Ikenberry, "Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony," *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 375–400.

⁵¹ Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, 122–27.

⁵² For an excellent, short-chronological account of international rearmament see Maiolo, *Cry Havoc*.

⁵³ David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2012), chap. 3; see also Katherine C. Epstein, "Scholarship and the Ship of State: Rethinking the Anglo-American Strategic Decline Analogy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March 1, 2015): 319–31, doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12237. Recent scholarship has shown that the Royal Navy easily remained the world's most powerful well into the Second World War. Maiolo, "Did the Royal Navy Decline between the Two World Wars?"

⁵⁴ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order 1916-1931* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 392 & chap. 24-26; Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, chap. 6 & passim; Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chap. 1. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York & London: Harper & Row, 1963) remains a magisterial account of the Depression in the US.

⁵⁵ Darwin, "The Fall of the Empire State," 502.

⁵⁶ Lawson, "The Eternal Divide?," 213; Anders Stephanson, "Cold War Degree Zero," in *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, ed. Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, “From the Transatlantic to the Transnational,” 138, who sees continued dynamism in transnational and imperial history instead. On the three ‘histories’ mentioned, see respectively Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1034, doi:10.2307/2168200; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the Longue Durée,” *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (2012): 493–507.

⁵⁸ Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino, “Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory,” *International Relations* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 389–410, doi:10.1177/0047117809340481.

⁵⁹ Rock, *Why Peace Breaks out*; Charles Kupchan et al., eds., *Power in Transition: The Peaceful Change of International Order* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2001); Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*.

⁶⁰ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011). Cf. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1998); *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 2013); Tooze, *The Deluge*.

⁶¹ Go, “Global Fields and Imperial Forms,” 206–7 & 213–14. As the term ‘field’ implies, this is a Bourdieusian IR theory, with actors in an ‘arena of struggle’ competing over real and social capital, whose struggle alters the ‘rules of the game’ as it goes along.

⁶² Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).